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The Good, the Bad, and the Boring: Barack Obama's China Trip in Review

November 19, 2009 in Uncategorized by [mcunningham](#) | [3 comments](#)

By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

Barack Obama spent fewer than three days in China, but his first trip there has been a week-long story in the news world, as countless journalists, academics, and pundits have shared their thoughts about what this visit could do for U.S.-China relations. Now that the president has left the PRC, how did it all go? Obama Administration officials are [speaking highly of it](#), claiming that Obama was forceful in private meetings with Hu Jintao and the rest of the Chinese leadership. And perhaps [the devil is in the details](#), as political scientist David Shambaugh says, speaking favorably of the joint statement of cooperation that Obama and Hu issued on Tuesday, which he thinks sets a positive tone for future Sino-U.S. relations.

However, most of us weren't privy to the Obama-Hu conversations, and my reading of the joint statement is somewhat more pessimistic than Shambaugh's. On the whole, I'd say that Obama's trip was anti-climactic, and even a bit disappointing. While most commentators didn't really expect that Obama would accomplish all that much during his time in China, a survey of what happened on the trip, and what's been written about it, reinforces the general sense among China watchers that very little got done. Below, a review of Obama-in-China, both the trip itself and the discussion surrounding it:

The Good:

1. The town hall meeting in Shanghai took place on Monday as planned. At one point last week, we were hearing stories that both American and Chinese officials had reservations about the event, and there were rumors that [it might be canceled](#) due to conflicts over who could attend and whether or not the meeting would be broadcast in China. Thanks to what I assume was a weekend full of closed-door negotiations, the town hall went ahead as scheduled. If it hadn't, Obama's trip would have been even less interesting — and both sides would have appeared unwilling to cooperate with the other. As for Obama's performance in the town hall meeting itself . . . well, see below for more, under "The Bad."

2. My Google Reader has been full of great writing this week. A trip like Obama's generates a lot of press, and those of us in the China field have been feasting on it. A few of the pieces I like the most are [Isabel Hilton](#), on internet censorship in China (hat tip to [China Digital Times](#)); [Paul French](#), comparing Obama's arrival in Shanghai to that of Ulysses S. Grant when he visited China in the late 1870s; and all of the short takes that [Evan Osnos](#) has posted at his *New Yorker* blog. [Yale Global Online](#) has two thoughtful pieces about Obama in Asia, and there are some interesting essays at *The Daily Beast* — one by [Peter Beinart](#) on the shifting U.S.-China dynamics that few people seem to have noticed, and another by [Richard Wolffe](#) summing up "Obama's Bad Trip."

3. While nothing spectacular happened, at least the trip went smoothly. Sometimes, that's enough — we shouldn't discount the importance of maintaining the status quo, which I think is more or less what Obama managed to do on his first visit to China. Ian Johnson speaks in a [video](#) at the *Wall Street Journal's* site about the somewhat ambiguous nature of Obama's relationship with the Chinese leadership, but also points to the fact that the two sides have agreed on a "[framework](#)" for future cooperation on some of the world's biggest issues. Obama has either three or seven more years to move the U.S.-China relationship forward, and the uneventful nature of his visit means that's still a possibility.

The Bad

The town hall meeting itself ([video](#) of the full event available at the White House website). My feelings about the town hall were initially somewhat mixed, but I've come down on the side of being less than impressed. Although I knew before the meeting that it was going to be a carefully scripted affair, and therefore didn't expect anything terribly interesting to occur, I still think it could have gone better. I cringed when Obama quoted a "Chinese proverb" in his opening remarks — really, isn't there a way to ban this tired speechwriting standby? — and groaned when he called on Ambassador Jon Huntsman to

ask a painfully pointed question about internet censorship. Given that the “should we be able to use Twitter freely?” query was pre-planned, Obama showed a surprising inability to answer it in a coherent manner. “I’m a big supporter of non-censorship” probably wasn’t the sound bite that Obama wanted to stand out from the hour-long town hall, but it’s representative of the stilted manner in which he tiptoed around issues. It was clear, I thought, that Obama *wanted* to talk about topics like Tibet and human rights, but held himself back from taking a hard stance on anything that could cause a confrontation with his Chinese counterparts.

The Boring:

Pretty much everything else. The most potentially dramatic event, the town hall meeting, occurred on Day 1 of Obama’s trip; the rest of his time in China was divided between meetings with state leaders and sightseeing at the standard can’t-miss spots, the Forbidden City and the Great Wall.

In the absence of interesting stories, the trivial took over. A few examples: The students who attended the town hall [were hand-picked by Communist Party officials](#) — maybe I’m a cynic, but I never expected otherwise. [Obama sped through his tour of the Forbidden City](#) — well, he’s a busy man. And Jon Huntsman called those of us who aspire to be China experts “[morons.](#)” I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that joke sounded funnier in his head.

As Obama wraps up his Asian tour and heads back to the U.S., what will be remembered about this first China trip? Most likely, the answer is “nothing.” There weren’t any standout moments — good or bad — and Obama missed several opportunities to send a clear message to activists in China that he supports their work (check out this [“Room for Debate”](#) blog at the *New York Times* for more on that issue). Instead, he seemed to drift genially from one staged event to the next, politely toured a few famous national landmarks, and met with his half-brother for five minutes.

Few know what was discussed in private meetings with Chinese leaders, but no impressive public announcements emerged to indicate that the U.S. and China will be collaborating on anything major in the coming years. Perhaps, however, this was the Obama Administration’s goal all along: to pull off a short, polite visit that didn’t make any waves but didn’t raise any problems in the Sino-U.S. relationship, either. If that’s the case, mission accomplished.

Tags: [Barack Obama](#)